

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

## *Book Review Symposium*

**James C. Scott**, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. ISBN: 9780691155296 (cloth); ISBN: 9780691161037 (paper)

James Scott's *Two Cheers for Anarchism* is an unusual, affecting, and useful book. Unusual in that each of its six chapters is composed of fragments: personal anecdotes, historical vignettes, and arguments that work together to describe anarchist practice. Early on in the book Scott describes work by ethnographers attempting to make sense of the poly-crop gardens they encountered amongst the peoples of the New World. What appeared at first as undisciplined chaos was in fact an attempt to harness the power of mutualism amongst plants—an intricate baroque order visible only on closer inspection. For me, working through these fragments was practice in Scott's 'anarchist calisthenics' but reward for this exercise is that what initially appeared as disorder coheres into a different understanding of the role of collective action in social change, the importance of local place in human organization, and what it means to really practice politics as opposed to 'administration'. The insights contained in this small volume are useful in addressing contemporary concerns about the post-political landscape as well as connecting with recent calls for autonomous geographies including alternative practices in organizing households, economies, and engagements with ecologies (e.g. Chatterton and Pickerell 2010; Gibson et al. 2013; Gibson-Graham et al. 2013).

In his preface Scott explains that the idea for the book came to him over many years as he realized again and again that the arguments he was making were anarchist arguments. Following Proudhon one thing that defines anarchism is: "mutuality, or cooperation without hierarchy or

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state rule. Another is the anarchist tolerance for confusion and improvisation that accompanies social learning, and confidence in spontaneous cooperation or reciprocity” (p.xii). To this definition Scott adds important qualifications: an emphasis on the anarchist approach to debate and politics but a rejection of its scientific utopianism. Scott does not always regard the state as an enemy (pointing out the role that it played in promoting civil rights), and finally he rejects the libertarian variant of anarchism that disregards (or even celebrates) the consequences of economic inequality, pointing out that anarchy for the wealthy is what allows them to prey upon the poor and vulnerable (p.xiii-xv).

The distance he takes from libertarianism and his concern with inequality introduces a significant theoretical paradox that, in my view, changes the nature of the book and how Scott invites us to view the anarchist tradition. This paradox complicates his understanding of what anarchism is but also makes it much more relevant to contemporary democracies in the US and elsewhere. To quote Scott at length:

“The market measures influence in dollars, while a democracy, in principle, measures votes. In practice, at some level of inequality, the dollars infect and overwhelm the votes. Reasonable people can disagree about the levels of inequality that a democracy can tolerate without becoming an utter charade. My judgment is that we have been in the ‘charade zone’ for quite some time. What is clear to anyone except a market fundamentalist (of the sort who would ethically condone a citizen’s selling himself—voluntarily, of course—as a chattel slave) is that democracy is a cruel hoax without *relative* equality. If relative equality is a necessary condition for mutuality and freedom, how can it be guaranteed except through the state? Facing this conundrum, I believe that both theoretically and practically, the abolition of the state is not an option. We are stuck,

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alas, with Leviathan, though not at all for the reasons that Hobbes had supposed, and the challenge is to tame it. That challenge may well be beyond our reach” (p.xvi).

Of course the reader cannot but be initially struck by his pronouncement that the state is insuperable. Further Scott readily acknowledges the different ways in which state organization undermines the practices of mutualism and solidarity that define anarchy. According to Scott, the ‘liberal state’ depends upon these proclivities to function and yet, at the same time, ultimately undermines and usurps their power. The neoliberal state likewise threatens to replace any memory of mutuality with the constant exercise of calculative self-interest. The end result, as Scott suggests, is that “two centuries of a strong state and liberal economies may have socialized us so that we have largely lost the habits of mutuality and are in danger now of becoming the precisely the dangerous predators that Hobbes thought populated the state of nature” (p.xxii-xxiii). It would appear that we can neither live with or without the state.

Scott’s assessment of our present predicament reminds me of similarly chilling arguments made over the past decade and a half: Norman Geras’s (1998) description of the contract of mutual indifference that underwrites the social order, Wendy Brown’s (2003) various assessments of post-democracy, or the number of geographers concerned with the post-political condition in an era of expert rule (e.g. Davidson 2012; Swyngedouw 2010). Indeed, as Scott points out it is easy for us to see a world where politics—debate, decisions, and experimentation—is replaced with the anti-politics of administration: the contemporary university’s fixation on assessing students and counting faculty citations is an object lesson in this (p.105-118). But what Scott’s book offers us is a way out, what he delivers in his collection of fragments is a representation of the admirable and enduring capacity for non-experts to exercise autonomy through cooperation, collective action, and social learning (play) (p.xxiii). To name but a few of his examples:

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- The role of spontaneous desertion in ending the civil war and other conflicts;
- The ability of truly effective political speakers to deeply listen to their audience and, in so doing, charismatically harness the power of affect;
- ‘Work to rule’ as collective labor action;
- The role of unstructured play in the development of human beings; and
- The calculated use of violence by the ‘Black Block’ to draw attention to the anti-globalization protests in Seattle.

This is a very partial list of the examples that Scott uses to describe anarchist practice, one where exercising autonomous power (or autonomous learning and experimentation) is *always* an option regardless of the state of affairs. The power of these practices is that they allow us to recover our capacities for mutualism, to partially undo what Scott describes as two centuries of institutional neurosis (p.79). Scott asserts early on in his text that collective actions of these sorts spawn social movements and not the other way around. By interrupting the existing social order we can regard collective action as a radical version of innovation, innovation not in the service of capitalism (Akrich et al. 2003). This is certainly true of the Occupy movement. It accomplished in a few months what years of critical examinations of neoliberalism failed to do—injecting economic inequality into everyday political discourse while also giving us powerful examples of collective social responses to the effects of inequality. A most notable example is Occupy member efforts to address the effects of super-storm Sandy and their attempts to build functioning solidarity economies (see Solidarity NYC 2013).

By way conclusion, one way of understanding the intellectual significance of Scott’s contribution is that his anarchist calisthenics offers radical scholars and activists an opportunity to practice something other than critique, something many have recently called for. Michael

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Hardt (2011) declares that the critical project ultimately fails to deliver upon its emancipatory promises while James Ferguson (2009) asserts that the politics of denunciation is unsatisfying to progressives seeking a way beyond neoliberal hegemony. Hardt envisions an alternative, militant biopolitics in which people follow in the tradition of the cynics by means of collective experimentation in alternative modes of living. In doing this, in Hardt's (2011: 34) view, we move from a desire to be governed less towards a capacity to govern ourselves more and differently. What I see in Scott's work is a further elaboration of what this might look like.

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